

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass)'

(COM(2003) 796 final)

(2004/C 117/05)

On 14 January 2004, the Council of the European Union decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 149 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the 'Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass)' (COM(2003) 796 final).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 6 April 2004. The rapporteur was Mr Dantin.

At its 408th plenary session on 28 and 29 April 2004 (meeting of 28 April), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 93 votes with four abstentions:

1. Introduction

1.1 In its 1997 'Proposal for a Council Decision on the promotion of European pathways for work-linked training, including apprenticeship' (COM(97) 572 final) ⁽¹⁾, the Commission basically indicated that, in the context of the completion of the single market and, more generally, that of the building of a Europe without frontiers, trainee mobility was becoming an increasingly important dimension of European citizenship, as well as an instrument of multi-cultural and social integration.

1.2 Lack of transparency in qualifications and competences has often been regarded as an obstacle to mobility, for either educational or occupational purposes, and a constraint on developing the flexibility of labour markets in Europe.

1.3 With a view to remedying this situation, an explicit emphasis has been placed on these issues at both national and European level over recent years.

1.3.1 At the Lisbon European Council of March 2000, the Presidency conclusions identified increased transparency of qualifications as one of three main components in an approach aiming at a better match between the skills and qualifications provided by education and training systems and the emerging needs of the knowledge society in terms of the level and quality of employment and lifelong learning.

1.3.2 Two years later, the Barcelona European Council set the objective for European education and training to become a world quality reference by 2010. To this end, it specifically called for further action to ensure the transparency of diplomas and qualifications through appropriate instruments.

1.3.3 To do so, the Communication from the Commission on an Action Plan for skills and mobility (COM (2002) 72 final) called for the implementation and development of instruments supporting the transparency and transferability of quali-

fications to facilitate mobility within and between sectors, as well as for the establishment of a One-stop European Mobility Information Site as part of a wider European network to provide comprehensive and easily accessible information to citizens on key aspects of jobs, mobility, learning opportunities and the transparency of qualifications in Europe. Moreover, the Council Resolution on skills and mobility of 3 June 2002 called for increased cooperation, inter alia with a view to establishing a framework for transparency and recognition based on the existing instruments.

1.3.4 Increased cooperation has begun in vocational education and training. Inspired by the 'Bologna process' in higher education, this process is based on two policy documents, the Copenhagen Declaration of 30 November 2002 and the Council Resolution of 19 December 2002 on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training.

1.3.4.1 The Copenhagen Declaration expressly called for action to increase 'transparency in vocational education and training through the implementation and rationalisation of information tools and networks, including the integration of existing instruments such as the European CV, certificate and diploma supplements, the Common European Framework of reference for languages and the Europass into one single framework'.

1.4 The present proposal for a decision establishes a single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences advocated by the Council Resolution of 19 December 2002, providing for the implementation and support measures it deems to be appropriate.

2. General comments

2.1 The Committee welcomes the overall content of this proposed European Parliament and Council Decision.

⁽¹⁾ ESC Opinion 635/98 of 29 April 1998 – Rapporteur: Mr Dantin – (OJ C 214 of 10.7.1998)

2.1.1 Indeed it shares the view that greater transparency of qualifications and skills will facilitate mobility throughout Europe for the purposes of lifelong learning, while helping ensure that these develop along quality lines. Transparency will also help boost mobility for professional reasons, between both countries and sectors, and may also contribute to an individual's personal development.

2.1.1.1 In doing so, this mechanism will contribute to employment policy and growth by facilitating the transferability of qualifications. By adding a new dimension to training in Europe, it will help strengthen European citizenship and at the same time assist in the consolidation of the single market.

2.2 The Committee generally approves of the practical, specific way proposed for implementing this guideline, which entails creating a document containing a description and certification of the skills and qualifications acquired by the holder through basic or continuous training or professional experience.

2.2.1 This portfolio, presented in a standardised fashion, will set out:

- the 'European curriculum vitae' developed by CEDEFOP;
- the 'language portfolio' which standardises presentation of language skills;
- the 'diploma supplement' which sets out a person's academic career in order to make it easier to give equivalent ratings for qualifications, thus facilitating mobility;
- the 'certificate supplement' which sets out a person's professional qualifications, in the same way as the 'diploma supplement'; and
- lastly the 'Europass training' document – from which the name 'Europass' in this proposal is derived - which outlines skills acquired in the course of work-linked training, part of which is carried out in another Member State. This document will henceforth be known as the 'Mobilipass'.

In addition to these 'Europass documents', there may be other documents approved by the Commission after consultation with the Europass National Agencies.

2.3 The Committee also agrees that each Member State should appoint a Europass National Agency (ENA) responsible, at national level, for coordinating all Europass activities, if necessary replacing existing bodies with a similar role, such as the 'contact points'.

2.3.1 These agencies may be viewed as genuine 'one stop shops', since their task is to:

- coordinate – in conjunction with the relevant national bodies – procedures for issuing Europass documents or for making them available;
- promote the use of Europasses, inter alia via the Internet;

- ensure that suitable information and guidelines on the Europass and Europass documents are available to the public;

- provide the public with information and guidelines on learning opportunities in Europe, how education and training systems are structured, and other questions linked to mobility for learning purposes; and

- manage – at national level – the financial aid granted by the Community for all Europass-related activities.

2.3.2 Moreover, the Committee welcomes the fact that a European network of Europass National Agencies is being set up, coordinated by the Commission. This will make it easier to pass on information and good practices from one Member State to another, thus helping improve the quality and effectiveness of each agency's work.

2.4 Overall, the incorporation of existing tools in a coordinated framework which is promoted and monitored in each country by a single body – linked to others by a Europe-wide network - and which is backed up by suitable information systems at national and European level, will make it easier to gain access to these documents, secure greater consistency between them and raise their profile. A portfolio of document references improves communication efficiency more than a series of unrelated documents. This is a passport for rendering people's qualifications more readable and more easily communicable.

2.5 The Committee is interested to note that the thrust of the decision in hand is on the same lines as the 'Framework of actions for the lifelong development of competences and qualifications', agreed upon by the social partners in February 2002. Indeed in this connection, the social partners – in addition to the priority action which they felt had to be given to the recognition and validation of skills and qualifications – stressed the need to improve transparency and transferability as a means to facilitate geographic and occupational mobility and to increase labour market efficiency.

2.5.1 As pointed out in the Commission text, the social partners have a key role to play in relation to this decision and its implementation. The Advisory Committee for Vocational Training, comprising representatives of the social partners and Member States' national authorities, should be regularly informed about the implementation of this Decision.

2.5.2 This point should be included in the evaluation report on the Decision's implementation, which the Commission is to submit to the European Parliament and the Council every four years.

2.5.3 The evaluation report constitutes both an integral part and logical follow-up to the present Decision and its implementation. Consequently, when it is published, the EESC wishes the report to be referred to it for an opinion.

3. Specific comments

3.1 The proposed Decision provides for the possibility of including in the portfolio – in addition to the European-level instruments - other transparency-related mechanisms which might have been drafted at national and sectoral level, after approval by the Commission and consultation with the Europass National Agencies (see point 2.2 above).

3.1.1 The Committee feels that the process involved here is obscure, as are the criteria governing it, its modus operandi and all the aspects relating to this possibility, because they are not clearly defined. It seems necessary to clarify what is entailed in this process and make it more 'transparent'.

3.2 The Committee would stress the importance which should be attached to the information and communication campaigns to be carried out at European, national and sectoral level.

3.2.1 In fact, the measure under discussion is not only of value to young first-time job seekers, but it also targets the whole labour market. It is therefore crucial that it should not only be publicised in universities, but also brought to the attention of, and widely used by, employment and recruitment agencies.

3.2.2 Over and above the basic requirements, in order to be effective, these campaigns must also target the general public. From this point of view, it is vital that information on all aspects of this measure be available on-line and that a logo be devised which both conjures up an image of what is involved and is easy to recognise.

3.2.3 Making the information available on-line will mean that the network link-up between all Europass National Agencies will be more effective and will also mean that access will potentially be available to all workers, migrant workers included; the Committee welcomes this move.

3.2.4 However, although making Europass II information available on-line is crucial for achieving maximum efficiency, this must not preclude the use of paper documents, so as not to exclude those workers without internet access from making use of this system.

3.3 The Committee agrees that the responsibilities covered by 'Europass training' should be extended. Indeed turning 'Europass training' into the 'Mobilipass' entails a change of content by including more than just work-linked training. It will be able to cover other kinds of training, such as the ERASMUS programme and more generally all the Community programmes on education and apprenticeship. It will thus provide a more complete picture of knowledge acquired when moving around Europe to study and work.

3.4 Financially speaking, the budget earmarked for this is similar to the one set aside in previous years for 'Europass training', despite the fact that the new measure now entails much more and the European Union is about to be enlarged to 25 members. This budget has only been drawn up for the 2005-2006 period, and it has been pointed out that the funds set aside for the following years 'will not be substantially higher'.

3.4.1 The Committee recommends that well before 2010, when the evaluation report is due to be submitted to the Parliament and the Council, a financial report should be compiled on the first two years of operation, and used as a basis for determining the budgets for 2007 and beyond.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Overall, the Committee welcomes the proposal.

4.2 The principles and implementation arrangements contained in this measure provide a coherent, logical follow-up to the series of guidelines and decisions taken at the Lisbon and Barcelona European Councils and set out in the November 2002 Copenhagen declaration.

4.3 Greater transparency as regards qualifications and skills will make mobility easier throughout Europe, not only for professional purposes, but also for education and training.

4.4 The Europass will provide a useful contribution to employment policy and to boosting employment. By adding a new dimension to training, education and apprenticeship in Europe, it will help strengthen European citizenship and at the same time contribute to the consolidation of the single market.

4.5 The Committee supports the move to establish a Europass National Agency in every Member State; these could be viewed as genuine 'one stop shops' in this sphere.

4.6 The social partners must be involved in implementing this measure.

4.7 The proposed Decision would be more precise if it clearly indicated the arrangements and criteria for determining which national and sectoral instruments can be incorporated into the Europass II portfolio.

4.8 The Committee stresses how important it is for the success of this process for information and communication campaigns to be carried out and for all aspects of this measure to be made available on-line.

4.9 The Committee would suggest that a financial evaluation be carried out after two years of operation.

Brussels, 28 April 2004.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger BRIESCH